DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 297 269 CS 009 217

AUTHOR Masters, Kathy J.
TITLE Illiteracy: A Problem for the Humanities.
PUB DATE Mar 88
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National American Culture Association (10th, New Orleans, LA, March 23-26, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Faculty; College Students; Higher Education; *Humanistic Education; *Illiteracy; Remedial Programs; Teacher Student Relationship; Teaching Assistants
IDENTIFIERS National Assessment of Educational Progress

ABSTRACT

Literacy must not be thought of as an elitist concept where only a privileged few are entitled to a formal education, but as a humanistic concept promoting human culture. A recent study found that by the year 2000 a majority of all new jobs will require a postsecondary education. All indications are that many students will continue to enter college with only limited literacy skills. Part of the problem is that while college faculty typically refuse to accept the responsibility for teaching students with limited literacy skills, remedial programs alone cannot bear the full burden. One potential way of helping students with limited literacy skills is to employ graduate assistants to work with small groups. It cannot be assumed that the situation will solve itself or simply disappear. It is the responsibility of educators to provide help to those with limited literacy skills. (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED297269

Illiteracy: A Problem for the Humanities

Kathy J. Masters

501/972-2080

501/932-0706

Box 817

Arkansas State University

State University, Arkansas 72467

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Kathy J. Masters

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

A Paper Presented at

National American Culture Association

Tenth Annual Meeting

March 24, 1988

New Orleans, Louisiana

CS 205217

Illiteracy: A Problem for the Humanities

The number of American illiterate adults cited by authors such as Jonathan Kozol in his book, ILLITERATE AMERICA, staggers the educated mind. According to Kozol, a conservative figure is 60 million, "well above one third of all American adults."[1] His study is based on 1984 data. Tragically, those figures are not diminishing. On the contrary, they are rising at the alarming rate of 2.3 million every year.[2]

Ironically, more jobs in the future will require more literate people to fill them. A 1987 study commissioned by the Department of Labor, "Workforce 2000," found that a majority of all new jobs in the United States will require postsecondary education by the end of the century.[3] Out of the 15 million Americans who have lost their jobs since 1979, "three-fourths of those workers cannot be retrained easily because they lack basic skills. Moreover, 70% of those who will be in the workforce in the year 2000 are already out of school."[4]

Some efforts are being made at the community level to reach the adult who wants to either learn to read or who wants to improve his reading skills. But those efforts suffer from lack of funds, limited staff, inadequate physical facilities, not enough books, poor access, and many other inadequacies. There are a few groups such as the Literacy Volunteers of America and Laubach Literacy Volunteers who are reaching as many people as they can. But together, they serve fewer than 100,000. Even the largest program, the federally funded Adult Basic Education, serves no

more than two million. These few people, almost without exception, never intend to attempt college work. They do well just to seek help from volunteer, community, or national programs. And even when they do get help, seldom do they advance to a college level. Nevertheless, there are students in college who are illiterate.

A study done by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) based on 1985 data reports on the literacy skills of young adults aged 21-25. Three scales on the assessment represented distinct aspects of literacy:

> Prose comprehension - knowledge and skill needed to understand and use information from texts such as poems, editorials, and news stories;
>
> Document literacy - knowledge and skills needed to locate and use information in nontextual materials, including tables, forms, maps, and bus schedules;
>
> Quantitative literacy - knowledge and skills needed to apply arithmetic operations in combination with printed materials, as in balancing a checkbook or completing an order form.[5]

The finding was not that these young adults have problems with simple tasks such as writing short job descriptions or adding entries on bank deposit slips, but that only a small percentage function well on more complicated tasks such as "deriving the main argument from a newspaper editorial, using a bus schedule to select the appropriate bus for given departures and arrivals, or determining the 10 percent tip on a restaurant bill."[6]

Another study done by NAEP, based on data from 1971-1984, reports on the reading proficiency of 9-, 13-, 17-year old students at or above the

following reading proficiency levels: Rudimentary (150), Basic (200), Intermediate (250), Adept (300), and Advanced (350). The NAEP found that:

> Six percent of 9-year-olds in 1984 could not do rudimentary reading exercises and were in danger of future school failure. Forty percent of 13-year-old students and 16 percent of 17-year-old students had not acquired intermediate reading skills, and may have had difficulty reading the range of academic material they encountered in school.[7]

Further findings indicate that "the majority (61 percent) of 17-year-old students are unable to perform at the adept level, and few (5 percent) have advanced reading skills."[8]

The results of NAEP's report on the writing performance of 4th, 8th, and 11th grade school children (1983-84) are at least as bleak as those on the reading performance. The assessment involved three different types of writing including Informative, Persuasive, and Imaginative. The conclusion was:

> that most students, of all racial/ethnic backgrounds, are unable to write well except in response to the simplest tasks. While writing performance was better at the higher grades, even in the 11th grade fewer than one-fourth of the students performed <u>adequately</u>. In general, American students can write at some <u>minimal</u> level, but cannot express themselves suffiently well to ensure that their writing will accomplish the intended purpose.[9]

Why should the results of these studies be of significance to those of us currently involved in postsecondary education? One reason is that some of the individuals involved in the assessment of the literacy skills of young adults aged 21-25 are presently enrolled in postsecondary universities, and a number of the students involved in the reading and writing assessments who were 17 years old at the time the data were collected will by now be enrolled in college. Those who were younger than 17 will probably be enrolled in college in the near future. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the largest number of students in undergraduate, four-year institutions, as a percent of total enrollment, will be between the ages of 20-25 in 1992.[10]

The fact is that many students enter college with only limited literacy skills, and certainly for the remainder of this century, all indications are that the same will continue to be true. Although we read about the facts, somehow we tend to treat them as if they refer to situations at many colleges, but not ours. For some reason, most of us, especially those who teach in the humanities, still believe that our students should be able to read and write at the college level; therefore, we make assignments, and we harbor expectations based on that belief. When our students perform poorly, we blame their poor performance on them or the system that failed them in the past. We share none of the blame ourselves. We just allow them to fail. We say to our colleagues, "Well, if those students can't do the work, then they don't belong here." We want the situation to be different from what it is, and we expect the <u>situation</u> to change without <u>our</u> having to make any changes. We say, "It shouldn't be this way!" But the fact is that it <u>is</u> this way.

Jonathan Kozol says, "Affluent people tend to look upon illiteracy with comfortable detachment."[11] But I think we can go a step further to say, "Educated people tend to look upon illiteracy with comfortable detachment!" Something about us educators at the college level wants to set up an invisible wall between us and the outside world. We want to isolate ourselves within a protective boundary that is blind to reality. Intellectually we grasp the data, the numbers, the facts, but emotionally we will not allow ourselves to accept them as truth. We still pretend that the data are one thing, but our students are another, while retention rates continue to drop.

State-operated postsecondary institutions still operate under the open-door policy. The assumption is that all students who have graduated high school or who have passed the General Educational Development (GED) should have equal access, but the truth is that they do not all have equal opportunity. Those who have limited literacy skills are at a severe disadvantage, which most of them are unable to overcome. They cannot do it without help. And it is our responsibility to provide that help. We no longer can afford to wait for someone else to do something to solve the problem.

The cost of illiteracy is staggering. The Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy at Penn State University has said that the cost of workplace illiteracy "is at least $225 billion per year, just in terms of lost productivity, welfare and related crime and prison expenses."[12] But that is in the real world. We notice, though, that in the university world, because of state legislation raising standards for college entry, more and more money is being spent on remedial and developmental programs.

For example, in Arkansas the new American College Test (ACT) cut-off scores for assignment to remedial courses which will go into effect in the fall of 1988 are 14 in mathematics, 15 in English composition, and 15 in reading. Students scoring at or below these levels will automatically be placed in remedial courses. In the fall of 1989, the cut-off scores will be 15 in mathematics, 16 in English composition, and 16 in reading. What will happen as a result of these scores is that minimally 40 to 50 percent of incoming freshmen at Arkansas State University, which is the place where I teach, will be placed in remedial courses. As a result, according to Dr. Eugene Smith, President of ASU, faculty will get no raises in 1988 because the money allotted by the state for faculty raises must be spent for hiring more teachers to teach remedial courses. The faculty at ASU are becoming shockingly aware of the cost of illiteracy since it is being taken directly out of our pockets.

Part of the current problem is due to the fact that college faculty typically refuse to accept the responsibility for teaching students with limited literacy skills. We all want to assume that our students are eligible for classes in an Honors Program. We expect them to be able to read the literature that we assign them, to write well the papers that we assign them, and to work through problems on their own that we assign them. However, seldom do we want to help them with these assignments. Frequently, I have former students of mine or advisees in my office who tell me, "I can't read this chapter in my history book well enough to understand it. What am I going to do?" or "My teacher assigned a paper for us to write by the next class period. I'm not sure what he wants us

to do, and he said he wouldn't help us with it. If I don't understand what he wants, how will I ever get a passing grade?" or "My math teacher makes an assignment for the next class period, and during the first ten minutes of the next class period, she gives us a quiz over the assignment. If I don't understand how to do the assignment, how can I do well on the quiz? I'm going to have to drop this class." These are just a few types of frustrations that they have. They all revolve around literacy skills: reading, writing, and mathematics. Such students know that their skills are limited, they want to do well on their assignments, but they feel that their teachers do not want to help them. They lack self-confidence, and they are afraid of failure.

What can we do? It is true that we have remedial programs, but they cannot bear the full burden. They should not be used, but too often are, as dumping grounds for what many professors think of as "refuse or undesirables" on the college campus. The fact is that several remedial or developmental programs are directly responsible for keeping many students with either limited skills or adjustment problems in college and for assisting them to improve their skills enough so that they can pass college level work and eventually get a degree. Without these programs, many more people would be out on the street.

One source that has not been tapped at many universities is graduate assistants. We are fortunate at ASU to have money for many graduate assistants both at the masters degree level and the specialist degree level. In various departments we could set up reading groups where graduate assistants could work with small numbers of five or six students to help them read and understand a chapter in a textbook, a short story, or a poem. We could set

up writing groups where graduate assistants could help students with writing assignments. We could do the same with mathematics. Problems occur, however, when graduate assistants are not trained to work with students who are weak in these areas. If they do not want to work with such students, or if they do not know how, they will do more harm than good.

But faculty could be of great help, too. We could set aside an hour a week for students who need help with assignments and work with them ourselves. The problem, of course, is that there are more students that need help than we can handle. But we have to start somewhere. If we can help only five per semester to improve their literacy skills, that is five more who have a better chance. It may be that we can push for a reduced class load in order to do more work with small groups of students. It is a certainty that we cannot expect a pay increase, but after all, greater literacy is worth more than we can measure with a dollar value. I agree with Jonathan Kozol's statement in a Point of View article in THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION, "A humanism that would scorn humanity and relegate compassion to 'another expert' perpetuates those insular compartments that our humanists repeatedly deplore."[13] We must be the ones to help. We cannot afford to place the sole responsibility for helping on others.

Likewise, we cannot assume that the situation will solve itself or that it will simply disappear. In his article, "The Language of Exclusion: Writing Instruction at the University," Mike Rose, Director of Freshman Writing at the University of California at Los Angeles, explains that if college faculty accept the myth that the problem of having so many poorly prepared students enrolled in postsecondary institutions as temporary, then we can conclude that, "The problem is not ours in any fundamental way; we

can embrace it if we must, but with surgical gloves on our hands."[14] Recent studies, however, do not indicate that the problem is temporary. In spite of the fact that most states have raised the standards of public education in a number of ways such as frequent testing of reading ability, more course requirements, more class days per school year, etc., there is no sign that entering college students possess greater literacy skills. This situation may force some changes in higher education. In his address in November, 1987, to the College Section/Conference on College Composition and Communication Luncheon in Los Angeles, Willie Brown, speaker of the California State Assembly, told the audience, "I believe we ought to reassess how we go about teaching English, and how we address the whole literacy question."[15]

It is not, however, only the English teacher who needs to assess how he teaches English. Rather, it is all of us who need to evaluate how we teach our subjects. But also, we must look at the student: how can we assist him to improve the quality of his life. If the jobs of the future are going to require postsecondary education, then we should figure out a way to make it possible for more people to get a postsecondary education. We must not think of literacy as an elitist concept where only a privileged few are entitled to a formal education, but as a humanistic concept promoting human culture. If educational institutions are to be humanistic, then they should exist for human good.

Notes

[1]Jonathan Kozol, ILLITERATE AMERICA (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1985), p. 10.

[2]Nancy Larrick, "Illiteracy Starts Too Soon," PHI DELTA KAPPAN, 69 (November, 1987), 184.

[3]Rick Gladstone, "Crisis Looms - Many U.S. Workers Lack Basic Literacy Skills," JONESBORO (Ark.) SUN, 22 Feb. 1988, p. 24, col. 4.

[4]Anne C. Lewis, "Reading the Writing on the Wall," PHI DELTA KAPPAN, 69 (March, 1988), 468.

[5]U.S. Dept. of Educ., THE CONDITION OF EDUCATION by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (Washington, D.C.: 1987), p. 30.

[6]U.S. Dept. of Educ., THE CONDITION OF EDUCATION, p. 30.

[7]U.S. Dept. of Educ., THE CONDITION OF EDUCATION, p. 13.

[8]U.S. Dept. of Educ., THE CONDITION OF EDUCATION, p. 13.

[9]U.S. Dept. of Educ., THE CONDITION OF EDUCATION, p. 18.

[10]U.S. Dept. of Educ., PROJECTIONS OF EDUCATION STATISTICS TO 1992-93, (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1986), p. 13.

[11]Kozol, p. 19.

[12]Gladstone, col. 5.

[13]Jonathan Kozol, "Dehumanizing the Humanities," CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION, 13 March 1985, p. 88.

[14]Mike Rose, "The Language of Exclusion: Writing Instruction at the University," COLLEGE ENGLISH, 47 (April, 1985), 357.

[15]"NCTE to You," prepared by Diane Allen and Headquarters Staff, COLLEGE ENGLISH, 50 (February, 1988), 164.